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How Shall the Trees Clap If They Have No Hands?

Nancy L. Dresser

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Figure 1 — "Amputated" by Roly Fenwick, 1999, oil on canvas

This painting hangs in my living room above the fireplace mantle. It is an oil on canvas painted by the Canadian artist Roly Fenwick. Roly Fenwick was born in Owen Sound and grew up on the Niagara Escarpment, so many of his paintings reflect his lifetime of experience living in the Bruce Peninsula. He has said of his work, "I don't paint pretty pictures … And swamps always turn me on because they are natural gardens to me, and that's why I call them random gardens. To me, I get the feeling of a real source of energy there … of things happening."[2] Trees are a favourite subject of Fenwick's, and he has painted them many times over. He has said that they talk to him.

In many ways, this particular piece is a sad painting of a tree, and we are often asked why we chose it. Truth be told, I chose it. My husband is less fond of it, and has unceremoniously nicknamed it "After the Forest Fire." The painting is actually called "Amputated." It is an ironic depiction because most paintings of trees have their branches and plenty of leaves; they have not been stripped naked and cut, as this one has.

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[2] Michael Gibson Gallery, "Roly Fenwick Mini-Documentary," with Roly Fenwick, Joel Faflak, and Madeline Lennon, May 2016, Vimeo video, 7:12 min., https://vimeo.com/166839598

The Bible is full of images of trees. But when I look at this tree, I think of the passage in Isaiah 55 depicting the exuberant return home of an exilic people:

> You will go out in joy
> and be led forth in peace;
> the mountains and hills
> will burst into song before you,
> and all the trees of the field
> will clap their hands.[3]

And I wonder, how can a tree clap its hands if its hands have been amputated?

We Christians pride ourselves on knowing a thing or two about the act of praise, which is at the heart of worship and the life of the church. However, if our praise is examined deeply (which is something we tend not to do), it could be argued that it does not come naturally. In contrast, the rest of the created world's praise is depicted in the Bible as inherently natural. Throughout scripture we see heaven and earth, meadows and valleys, forests and mountains, rivers and hills bursting into song, clapping, shouting for joy.[4] In Psalm 19 we are told that, even though the skies cannot speak, they loudly proclaim the glory of God:

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
> Day after day they pour forth speech;
> night after night they reveal knowledge.
> They have no speech, they use no words;
> no sound is heard from them.
> Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
> their words to the ends of the world.[5]

So how do we understand a creation that praises God? Is it simply poetic language? Is it no more than a metaphor for human praise of God? Do we praise God on account of the magnificence of creation, or are the natural elements of creation able to praise God of their own accord? Three decades ago, these questions might have appeared absurd. Indeed, throughout almost its entire history, the focus of theology has been an examination of the nature of the relationship between God and humankind. In contrast, comparatively little has been written about God's relationship to the created world. It is only now, with humans facing the ecological devastation caused by their misuse and abuse of creation, that questions regarding how God relates to the natural world and how the natural world relates to God are beginning to be examined.

Dr. Mark Harris of the University of Edinburgh's Science and Religion program has argued that two things have gotten in the way of this examination: first, a belief in the uniqueness of human beings as created in the *Imago Dei,* and second, an anthropocentric

[3] Is. 55:12, NIV.
[4] See Ps. 65:11–13, Ps. 98:8, Is. 44:23, Lk. 19:40, Rev. 5:13.
[5] Ps. 19:1–4, NIV.

worldview.[6] Regarding the first issue, the reality is that all species are unique. But even if we argue that human beings are uniquely unique, evolutionary theory has challenged how sharply we distinguish ourselves from other species such that our specialness is something we should assert with caution. With respect to the second issue, climate change has challenged our anthropocentrism as we have been forced to reckon with our interdependence with all other forms of life that share this planet and the fact that "every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings," as is stated in *The Earth Charter*.[7]

Hubris has led humans to take great liberty with the creation story, placing ourselves in a position of dominance over the rest of creation that we have little justification for occupying. Instead, as described in *The Earth Charter*, humankind must recognize that "with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good."[8] Likewise, we have assumed that our intercession is needed in God's relationship with the created world, as if God cannot communicate or work in and through creation without us. We have stood in between God and the rest of creation, denying the possibility that God can communicate and be in relationship directly with creation itself. It is just one more way in which we have limited our notions of the divine.

There are now some contemporary theological theories as to how the natural world might directly praise its Creator, but perhaps we need to look back to the mystics, who were much more comfortable abiding in the unknown. St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), writing of her vision, speaks in the voice of the Holy Spirit – the third Person of the Trinity:

> I am that living and fiery essence of the divine substance that flows in the beauty of the fields. I shine in the water; I burn in the sun and the moon and the stars. The mysterious force of the invisible world is mine. I sustain the breath of all living beings. I breathe in the grass and in the flowers and when the waters flow like living things, it is I … fire burns by my blast. I am Wisdom. The blaring thunder of the Word by which all things were made is mine. I permeate all things that they may not die, I am life.[9]

Her vision suggests that the presence of the living God is within every creature and throughout all of creation. Interestingly, even though Karl Barth (1886-1968) lived before the recognition of climate change, he too conceived of the relationship of the natural world with the Creator and the failure of humankind to respect it:

> When man accepts his destiny in Jesus Christ … he is only like a latecomer slipping shamefacedly into creation's choir in heaven and earth, which has never ceased its praise, but merely suffered and signed, as it still does, that in inconceivable folly and ingratitude its living centre man does not hear its voice, its response, its echoing of

[6] Mark Harris, "'Let the Floods Clap Their Hands; Let the Hills Sing Together for Joy' (Ps. 98:8): Is Joy the Theological and Emotional Shaper of the Inanimate World?" (paper presented at the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology Conference, Assisi, 2014), https://www.academia.edu/6981351.
[7] Earth Charter Commission, 2000, *The Earth Charter*, retrieved from https://earthcharter.org/read-the-earth-charter/.
[8] *The Earth Charter*.
[9] Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of Divine Works*, Part I, Vision I.

> the divine glory, or rather hears it in a completely perverted way, and refuses to co-operate in the jubilation which surrounds him.[10]

If we allow for the possibility that on some level these scriptural texts of praise can be taken at face value (which is different than literally), that there is a mystery present that we do not (yet) understand, and that elements of the natural world interact, communicate, and are in relationship directly with the Creator, then, in addition to ecological consequences, human interference in these relationships has devastating spiritual consequences as well. When we amputate the limbs from trees, when we clear-cut forests, when we rape the land for more and more cash crops, when we dam rivers and pollute streams, when we drill and lay pipes for oil, when we acidify the rain, when we corrupt the delicate balance of ecosystems, we are obstructing creation from praising its Creator and thus impeding the relationship of the natural world with God. By determining an expansive theology of natural praise, by emphasizing a holistic relationship of humans to God within the web of nature, by "respecting the earth and life in all its diversity,"[11] we might avoid this sin and its consequences and instead live to praise God, clapping our hands alongside the trees.

[10] Karl Barth, *CD*, II/1, 648, quoted in David G. Horrell and Dominic Coad, "'The Stones Would Cry Out' (Luke 19:40): A Lukan Contribution to a Hermeneutics of Creation's Praise," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (2010): 29–44, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610001043

[11] *The Earth Charter*.